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Staging in Carrie's Psychological Development: Does She or Doesn't She?

by Kimberly Muta

How does Carrie Meeber, Theodore Dreiser's "half-equipped little knight" (4) in *Sister Carrie* (1900), fare from a feminist perspective which favors the psychological development of women into empowered individuals? One critic argues that she "does better for herself than if she had followed a more conventional path," such as marriage and family (Wolstenholme 254). I agree Carrie has gained power. Even if she does not completely develop into an independent woman, she certainly becomes an important and influential one.

This progress can be seen by plotting Carrie's development along Janet Hagberg's now famous stages of power: powerlessness, power by association, power by symbols, power by reflection, power by purpose, and power by Gestalt (viii). A person who moves through all six stages develops from being dependent, helpless, and manipulated to having wisdom and a concern with ethics and universalities (Hagberg 2-6, 133-144). Carrie does not make it as far as the sixth level, but she does progress to the threshold of the fifth. Two distinct types of forces exist in the novel that affect her development. One force is repressive; it impedes her progress. The other is liberating in that it aids her move from one level of power to the next.

Both the repressive and the liberating forces are embedded in the elements of staging in the novel: costuming, lighting, dialogue and role-playing. Dreiser applies these elements not only to the theater as it exists in the novel, but also to the world around his characters. Typically, Americans see the adoption of roles and costumes (as in theater) as repressive because the actor or actress is confined to the limits of his or her character. He or she must assume a false identity. Carrie, however, is liberated by her roles. They empower her and aid her development in spite of the repressive world around her.

Deborah M. Garfield, in an article titled "Taking a Part: Actor and Audience in Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*," describes how "staging"

in Carrie's life in the city corresponds to staging in the theater. Lighting, she argues, is an "element in which the stage, with its footlights, and the city, with its gaslamps, merge" (Garfield 225). Costuming also appears on and off the stage; New York's best-dressed show their finest clothes during the daily parade on the streets of Broadway (Garfield 224-225). Finally, she points out that role-playing connects life in and outside of the theater: "Like the actors in the Chicago and New York melodramas, the figures in *Sister Carrie* create their identities by shedding one role for another" (Garfield 227).

Garfield does not address the element of dialogue as it applies to Carrie's world and to the theater, but that, too, is an element that can be applied to her psychological development. In fact, her development of speech follows another psychological model: the five categories of "women's perspectives on knowing" as described in *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice and Mind*. The first category is "silence," in which women are voiceless and obedient to authority. The second is "received knowledge," in which they receive knowledge from that authority, but are incapable of producing knowledge themselves (Belenky, Goldberger, and Tarule 23-29, 36-37). These two categories correspond to Hagberg's stage one, in which the person is capable of being manipulated because he/she as yet lacks the knowledge to prevent it (1-6).

When Carrie comes to Chicago, she is in the first stage of development. She is "almost wordless" (Moers 109), but she does respond in conversations, although her responses, as Donald Pizer points out, "are usually limited to a smile, a frown, or a noncommittal reply" (85). Dreiser's narrative explanation is that Carrie cannot "arrange her thoughts in fluent order" and is therefore "no talker" (117). Belenky's explanation would be that Carrie is still bowing to external authority and has not yet progressed to the third category of knowing. Hagberg's interpretation would be that Carrie is in the powerless stage, allowing others to control and take care of her (2).

She does gain some power and initiative in her speech, however, with the help of one of her theater roles. After her performance in "Under the Gaslight," Carrie begins to "feel a certain faint power to jest with [Drouet]" about his intentions to marry her (Dreiser 198). Within the performance itself, Carrie's speech is "flat" and void of feeling when she first appears (Dreiser 181-182), but by the end "her voice [assumes] for the first time a penetrating quality which it had never known" (Dreiser 185). At this point, Carrie is moving into the third stage, "subjective knowledge." In this stage, women begin to under-

stand knowledge as something to be "intuited" (Belenky, Goldberger, and Tarule 54-55). Hagberg explains it as a feeling that power is almost within reach: "It is elusive, like magic" (20), or like intuition. Carrie can only explain the success of her speech at the end of the first act as something she "felt" (Dreiser 186). Off stage, she is able verbally to express her doubt about Drouet's promises to marry her because she is beginning to feel that "faint power" (Dreiser 198).

That gaining of power in speech suggests a liberation of sorts. It suggests that she is growing less dependent on knowledge from external authorities, but Carrie is unable to develop that power without her theater success to prompt her. It is only after she evokes a strong response from the audience with her speaking roles that she is able to evoke similar responses in everyday conversations. So it is indeed the dialogue element as applied to the theater that is liberating, rather than the dialogue in Carrie's world outside of the theater. Theatrical dialogue allows her to begin moving into Hagberg's level two, power by association. One characteristic of that level is "beginning self-exploration" (Hagberg 24-25), which Carrie does as she examines and acts on her intuition.

Unlike dialogue, the element of lighting in the novel is associated with masculine dominance and masculine gaze (a repressive force), since Carrie becomes powerless to "resist the glow of [Hurstwood's] temperament, the light of his eye" (Dreiser 205). Hurstwood's glow draws her away from a relationship with Drouet, in which she is finally gaining some power, and towards the dominating Hurstwood. Carrie's relationship with Hurstwood is certainly repressive; he exercises almost complete control over her. Thus, as it exists in the social world, this element (lighting) hinders her development.

The costuming element of staging, in contrast, is a force of liberation for Carrie's development, since it relies on what is typically a feminine skill. Part of Carrie's development into an independent individual is her growing knowledge and self-awareness. Carrie learns much regarding costuming by heeding comments from her critics and by "her work in the dressing room" (Dreiser 479). Her education in clothing also comes from Drouet and Mrs. Vance. "With Drouet's experience and opinion for a guide she [learns] to select colors and shades which [have] value in relation to her complexion" (Dreiser 146). Mrs. Vance "[takes] pleasure in tipping [Carrie] off to the latest things" and, in fact, "praises" her when she puts together a particularly attractive outfit (Dreiser 328).

At the same time Carrie's new knowledge of clothes liberates her,

the pressure to use that knowledge in the social world to compete with other women, including her friends, is repressive because it distorts her self-concept. Carrie's walk along the Broadway parade of fashions with Mrs. Vance makes her painfully aware of those inadequacies of her dress that still exist (Dreiser 324). But, as Dreiser's narration makes clear, only she sees: "Carrie felt that she needed more and better clothes to compare with this woman, and that anyone looking at the two would pick Mrs. Vance for her raiment alone . . . There was some difference in the clothing of the two, both of quality and age, but this difference was not especially noticeable" (Dreiser 322). The only thing that matters to Carrie is the competition, and that clouds her ability to judge herself accurately.

It is in the element of role-playing that the off-stage world becomes the most repressive, while the theater clearly becomes a force of liberation for Carrie. Carrie and Hurstwood assume false identities in the off-stage world. Carrie is first Drouet's wife, then Hurstwood's, but neither are legally binding (or real) identities. Hurstwood pretends first that he is a single man so Carrie will date him, and then pretends that he has become her husband so she will stay with him. It is true that stage roles are "false" or "unreal," just as Hurstwood's role as Carrie's husband is false; however, the audience and the actors are all aware of the unreality of the stage roles. There is no deception, only a willing suspension of disbelief. Roles in the theater are not repressive because everyone involved is aware of their falseness. In fact, people often attend the theater and watch these role-players in order to "escape" from their world – to be free or liberated for a little while from the cares and concerns of real life.

But the real life role that Hurstwood plays, the false role, is repressive for Carrie because she is kept from the truth. It is important to remember here that she is also not aware that *her* role is "unreal." She truly believes that she is legally his wife. This lack of knowledge on Carrie's part is a repressive force, as is the role itself. She feels that she is "bound to [Hurstwood] as a wife and that her lot [is] cast with his, whatever it might be" (Dreiser 342). Carrie is essentially imprisoned by her life of poverty with Hurstwood, without any means, financially, emotionally, or psychologically to develop, or any room to grow.

Fortunately, Carrie slowly begins to free herself from these constrictive roles via an acting career. Even while she's a mere chorus girl, Carrie begins to gain a sense of self. She realizes that in comparison to the stars of the production, she is "nothing" (Dreiser 392). Having learned where she stands in relation to others, she begins to judge her

talents against those in higher positions. She is now in the third stage of power in which she is realistic about her ability, ambitious, and eager to compete in her profession (Hagberg 48-51). After she finally manages to gain one of those positions herself, she discovers, with help from Ames, the nature of the talent that wins success for her in the theater.

What she discovers, as Lester Cohen explains, is "that her 'independence' is to be found in role-playing. Her sense of self can arise only from her ability to be as others see her" (367). She finally understands that she is a "medium" through which the rest of the world "expresses itself" (Dreiser 485). Carrie is liberated by her self-awareness. Admittedly, as an actress, she is limited by the roles she plays, but as an individual, she is freed by her understanding that through role-playing she can develop and prosper. Carrie, finally, is at stage four of Hagberg's power levels. She is a competent actress, comfortable with her off-stage role. She is ready to move to stage five, to reflect on her development and consider to what life purpose her role has led her (Hagberg 115): "She was thinking of the solution being offered her. Not money . . . Not clothes . . . Not applause – not even that – but goodness – labor for others" (Dreiser 486). Thus while Carrie Meeber's feminist journey is not completed in *Sister Carrie*, it is well begun.

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